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ABSTRACT

The problems associated with truancy and failure to complete school in the state of Maine were examined by an advisory committee of legislators and personnel from schools, prisons, and state government. The committee was directed to describe the incidence of the truancy and dropping out, to ascertain some of the causes of these problems, and to recommend strategies, including alternative programs, to address these problems. In addition, the committee was directed to review all appropriate statutes and to propose changes for legislative action relating to truancy, attendance laws, and alternative education. The results of the review indicated: (1) employment opportunities are limited for those who do not complete high school and their lifetime earnings are significantly lower than earnings of those who do; (2) it is impossible to ascertain the extent of dropping out because there is no consistent definition of dropout; (3) there is neither consistency in reporting nor an adequate mechanism for collecting information on students who leave public school prior to completing high school; (4) low self-esteem, lower than average grades and test scores, and little parental supervision signal an increased likelihood that a student will drop out; (5) programs to prevent truancy and dropping out must begin at the early elementary level; and (6) a local, community-based approach is needed to develop effective responses to dropping out and truancy. Four statistical figures are appended. (LLL)

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STAYING POWER

"LEAVING SCHOOL TOO SOON"

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STAYING POWER

"LEAVING SCHOOL TOO SOON"

Report of the Advisory Committee
on
Truants, Dropouts and Alternative Programs

January, 1987
Second Printing

Printed Under Appropriation # 4201.1111

Richard Redmond, Commissioner
Department of Educational & Cultural Services
State House Station #23
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Commissioner Redmond:

I am pleased to present this report on behalf of the Advisory Committee on Truants, Dropouts and Alternative programs. The report is the product of eight months of intensive examination of the problems associated with truancy and failure to complete school. It provides both an analysis of the magnitude of the problem in Maine and sets out a number of recommendations to address these problems.

During the course of our study, we sought the opinion of many people inside and outside the educational community. Most notably, we solicited information from young people who had been chronic truants or had dropped out of school for a time and from administrators and teachers for successful, alternative education programs. We found on the one hand that the problems are serious and of wide spread concern. On the other hand, we found that there are a range of strategies which hold promise to address these problems.

Some of these strategies required changes in the law. Indeed, the Committee, in advance of this report, successfully introduced a bill in the 112th Session of the Legislature which established a position in the Department with responsibility for providing technical assistance to schools and communities which are attempting to prevent or reduce truancy and dropping out and to establish an oversight committee which will plan for and monitor programs to address these problems. Other recommendations foresee, however, further refinements in the laws, particularly those which govern compulsory attendance. Some of the goals embodied in other recommendations can be achieved administratively. Nonetheless, some few will require new expenditures. The common theme among the recommendations, however, is that they are based on cooperation and a partnership in efforts between the State and local communities.

The members of the Committee are pleased to have had the opportunity to share in the efforts which culminated in the report. They very much hope that it will become the first page in a blueprint for a system which encourages the full participation of each of Maine's young citizens in a public education which continues, at minimum, through the twelfth grade.

Sincerely,

Merle Nelson

Merle Nelson, Chairperson
Advisory Committee

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TRUANTS, DROPOUTS AND ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

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DEDICATION

Jennifer Smith

Jennifer Smith worked for the Department of Human Services from June 24, 1968 until her death on June 27, 1986. She was a Caseworker and Supervisor in the Lewiston Office before being promoted to a Program Specialist position in Central Office in March 1983.

Jennifer Smith spent her adult life working for the care and protection of Maine's children. As a graduate of the University of Maine at Farmington with a degree in education, Jennifer taught for one year before pursuing a career in child protective services with the Maine Department of Human Services. For 18 years Jennifer gave dedication, energy and caring to children and families where child abuse and neglect was a problem.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Advisory Committee wishes to express its sincerest thanks to all those persons who provided invaluable assistance and information to them in completing this report. The number of persons is too numerous to list but includes staff from the Department of Educational and Cultural Services, Department of Labor, Department of Mental Health and Retardation; graduates and staff from The Community School (Camden) and the Franklin School (Auburn); school superintendents' and principals' associations; State Board of Education members; legislators and former commissioners of education.

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INTRODUCTION

In September of 1984, the 111th Legislature enacted the Education Reform Act, a comprehensive measure to promote the highest levels of academic excellence in Maine's public schools. A substantial component of the new law focused, as have similar bills enacted in other states, on the rigor of the curriculum and on requiring a demonstration of competence in core skills, such as reading and mathematics, as a prerequisite to promotion and graduation. The premise upon which the law is based, that rigorous standards must be established if Maine's children are to compete successfully in society as workers, parents and citizens, is not susceptible to challenge.

Nonetheless, as the bill was considered, many recognized that the procedures required to improve the skills of Maine's high school graduates in general would simultaneously increase pressures on marginal students and that truancy, dropping out and other school failures might well increase. In response to that insight, Commissioner Robert Boose constituted the Advisory Committee on Truants, Dropouts and Alternative Programs. The Committee was directed to describe the incidence of the truancy and dropping out, to ascertain some of the causes of these problems, and to recommend strategies, including alternative programs, to address these problems. In addition, Commissioner Boose requested the Committee to review all appropriate statutes and propose changes for legislative action relating to truancy, attendance laws and alternative education. Commissioner Richard Redmond altered neither the composition nor the charge of the Committee when he assumed leadership of the Department of Educational and Cultural Services in the Spring of 1986.

The Committee immediately identified several key issues which it must address if it were to attempt a reasoned assessment. It constituted a subcommittee with primary responsibility for each area of inquiry. The first was the scope of the problem: how many Maine citizens are truants and dropouts, where do they predominate and what are their common characteristics? The second was the law: what do we currently require with respect to school attendance and why is the current law inadequate to promote or compel attendance? The third and fourth issues are similar: what are Maine schools doing to promote attendance through alternative programs and what are other states doing to keep and to entice disaffected students back into the class room? The final issue, how do we prevent truancy and dropping out, crosses each of the other inquiries and restates the mission of the Committee. "Staying Power" is a synopsis of the deliberations of the Advisory Committee and its subgroups. The Committee hopes that it not only provides a fair assessment of these problems but, more important, a reasoned strategy for assisting all Maine's children to achieve academic success.

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

1. Employment opportunities are limited for those who do not complete high school and their lifetime earnings are significantly lower than that of those who do. Dropouts are more likely to require welfare assistance and/or to be involved in crime and delinquency. Therefore, completion of high school studies must be the minimum level of educational achievement for all Maine citizens.

2. At a time when society puts a growing premium on education, both dropping out of school and chronic truancy are continuing and serious problems. Both problems are being exhibited at increasingly younger ages.

3. Society, as a whole, has a responsibility for dealing with these problems. Maine must enlist the resources of state government, as well as those of the volunteer and business sectors, in a campaign to prevent and remediate truancy and failing to complete school.

4. It is impossible to get a clear picture of the extent of dropping out because there is no consistent definition of a dropout. For example, students who have left the public schools to enroll in religious schools are reported by some districts as dropouts or as students whose location is "unknown", while other districts include these students among those who are enrolled in school.

5. There is neither consistency in reporting nor an adequate mechanism for collecting information on students who leave public school prior to completing high school. In addition, it is not clear whether reporting of students who transfer within the state public school system is consistent.

6. The large number of students whose current situation is unknown makes it impossible to determine whether the number of dropouts is rising or falling.

7. Dropouts present a variety of profiles; however, certain characteristics signal an increased likelihood that a student will drop out. Low self-esteem is a key factor. Others are lower than average grades and test scores, and little parental supervision.

8. Students cite failure to experience success in school, desire or opportunity to go to work and marriage and pregnancy as primary reasons for dropping out.

9. Programs to prevent truancy and dropping out must begin at the early elementary level, both because the percentage of dropouts who leave school during the freshman year or earlier appears to be growing and because current research indicates that it is most cost effective to initiate prevention efforts at that level.

10. In practice, school attendance is essentially voluntary. Statutes governing truancy and dropping out, including provisions calling for establishing and operating Positive Action Committees, are largely inoperative. Many schools find it impossible or impractical to follow the prescribed procedures which are often ineffective to return the student to school.

11. A significant number of students who drop out before graduating from high school subsequently complete their education through a night school or a General Education Development (GED).

12. A local, community-based approach is needed to develop effective responses to dropping out and truancy. The preference for community-based approaches is supported by current research which indicates that the problems of truants and dropouts extend far beyond the schools. These data strongly suggest that community generated responses can offer effective solutions to both the in-school and out-of-school problems.

13. Alternative education programs, structured according to concrete guidelines, offer one useful approach to overcoming truancy and dropping out. The State should provide local schools with information about alternative education and with appropriate technical and financial support for such programs.

AGENDA FOR THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

In the Spring of 1986, the 112th Legislature took a substantial first step to reduce the number of Maine students who are truant or fail to complete high school. By enacting those recommendations of the Advisory Committee which directed assigning staff to the Department who had specific responsibility to develop plans and programs to deal with these problems and to assist and inform local schools and parents in their efforts to respond, by constituting a statewide advisory committee to provide continuing oversight of the problems and the status of programs to address it and by inviting the communities to develop solutions which are appropriate to local conditions by specifying these responses as a component of the School Improvement Plans, the Legislature erected a framework upon which the State and Maine's schools can build both short term and long range programs to respond to the needs of truants and dropouts.

The broad outline of the agenda for the new Advisory Committee is in some part established by statute. The Committee must work with the Commissioner and his staff to advise both him and the Legislature on the scope of these problems and how they may be addressed. To accomplish this mission, the original Advisory Committee foresees that its successor must not only enlist the active participation of communities and other agencies of State government in both prevention and remedial programs, but it must, along the way, overcome some of the deficiencies in the reporting and attendance laws if the efficacy of the approaches it will envision is to be validated. The original Committee, therefore, directs its recommendations in large part to its successor and, while expressing its appreciation of the challenges these directives present, conveys its firm conviction that the goal, high school completion by all of Maine's students, is attainable.

Staying Power

According to the 1980 census, 30 percent of Maine's adults, some 238,000 people, have not completed high school. Moreover, one out of every five Maine adults is functionally illiterate. Nationally, one out of every four students who enters high school fails to graduate with his/her class. All of these statistics must be reduced. Both state and national programs have been undertaken to increase literacy and other basic skills. But, can we demand greater competence while reducing the number of failures? Can we avoid the danger that the very activities which promote academic achievement may well increase the percentage of students who fail to complete school?

Concern about youth who fail to graduate from high school dates from the late 1950's and early 1960's. At that time, Dr. James Bryant Conant, a former president of Harvard University, studied American high schools and documented the difficulties, encountered and anticipated, for youth who do not acquire a high school diploma. In his book Slums and Suburbs, published in 1961, Conant accurately predicted:

> .....fewer and fewer completely unskilled workers will be able to obtain jobs in the decade ahead. Employers will want skilled workers.....professional workers will be in heavy demand. White collar jobs will grow at a more rapid rate than blue collar jobs.....

While the problem of dropouts is not a new one, it takes on a renewed importance because, in the 1980's, America's examination of education has focused on the rigor of the curriculum. There has been widespread dissatisfaction with the realization that, in some instances, students were being awarded high school diplomas, regardless of whether they had mastered the minimal skills which society might reasonably expect. There were

instances of graduates who were functionally illiterate and of graduates who could not do simple arithmetic. Americans who support the nation's public school system with their taxes were understandably outraged to learn that some students who hung diplomas on the wall could not read them.

In response to these revelations, many states increased the requirements for a diploma and routinely test students to ensure that they are mastering the skills required. Although few argue with the need for more rigorous standards, there is an accompanying irony: These changes in education, while improving the capabilities of high school graduates, simultaneously increase the pressure on marginal students. The push for higher standards threatens to push larger numbers out of the education system before graduation.

What Happens to the Dropouts?

As Dr. Conant foresaw, employment opportunities are constricting for this group. A 1982 study sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics reported a 27 percent rate of unemployment or job dissatisfaction among a group who had dropped out in their sophomore year two years earlier. Of those who were working, most were in low-skilled jobs. In the sampling, only 14 percent of males and 8 percent of females reported their most recent employment as a skilled trade. Among the young men, about 6 percent had enlisted in the military. Eleven percent were doing unskilled factory work and the balance were in such trades as lawn work, waiting tables, working at car washes or gas stations and other manual labor. Sixty-two percent of the young women reported their last job as waiting tables, baby sitting or other child care, clerical and office work or working as a retail clerk or in other sales. Many said they regretted their decision to leave school.

Lack of a diploma is not only a barrier to obtaining employment but an almost insurmountable hurdle to mobility once employed. Getting a secure foothold on the career ladder without completing a high school education is largely a phenomenon of the past. Moreover, should that hard won job disappear, the dropout is ineligible for some forms of assistance which would permit him/her to qualify for other employment. One example is the federal worker-retaining program which is designed to assist workers whose jobs are lost to foreign competition. This program is open only to high school graduates, apparently on the assumption that in an age of technology, high school completion is the minimum prerequisite. The employment outlook for a dropout is then anything but bright.

While not all dropouts and truants are unemployed, they are found in disproportionate numbers among the ranks of those not working. In addition, dropouts are more likely to be on the welfare rolls and have higher rates of crime and delinquency than their peers who complete high school. In Maine for example, where the dropouts comprise about 30 percent of the adult population, they accounted for 40 percent of the populations of the Maine State Prison and Maine Correctional Center in 1984. For a variety of reasons, many have given up on success for themselves. Others see success only in terms of survival.

Who Should Be Concerned?

Enlightened self-interest dictates that every taxpayer become concerned with this issue. High school graduates average lifetime earnings 25 percent above those who drop out. A UCLA study estimates losses to individuals and society of tens of thousands of dollars for each dropout. Research also indicates that the group of former dropouts ages 25-34 cost the nation some $77 billion annually. The great bulk of this is in lost tax revenues with additional billions in unemployment subsidies. The cost of welfare, crime and incapacitating or rehabilitating criminals is also a staggering contributor to the annual cost of the uneducated. Regardless of the varied manifestations of the problem, each of us, dropout or not, pays some portion of the bill.

How Can We Encourage Students to Complete School?

Although students cited lack of relevance of what was being taught, alienation between students and teachers and failure to experience success as reasons for dropping out, not all of the reasons are found within the schools themselves. The desire or opportunity to obtain employment, marriage and pregnancy were also frequently reported as "the cause." Explanations can then be found within the economy, the family, and throughout the society, as well as the schools. Nevertheless, the schools remain a logical place to address the problem. They are the easiest places in which to identify the truant or the potential dropout. The school is a place where we can make contact and confront the problem.

The resources of the education system alone cannot be expected to deal with such a multi-faceted problem, however. Addressing the needs of disaffected young people requires the cooperation and the assistance of other units of government, as well as the aid of institutions across society, including business and the volunteer sector.

There are no quick or easy solutions. Even getting a clear picture of the precise scope of the problem is difficult, since most districts have no easy way to know what has happened to a student who is no longer in school, particularly the student who is there in June and missing in September. Nevertheless, studies over the last several decades have identified sign posts to help us spot students likely to drop out. In addition, some of the hallmarks of successful programs for these students can be identified. With this information and a firm commitment on the part of both the State and Maine communities to attempt long range solutions, the problem can be addressed incrementally, economically and successfully.

How are Other States Responding?

The subcommittee on comparative legislation surveyed each of the 50 states and the territories in its attempt to determine the state of the nation with respect to truancy and failing to complete school. In general, survey responses were incomplete, but the 29 states who responded provided a great deal of useful information.

Not surprisingly, all responding states are interested in these problems. Nineteen are actively working on the issues. Their laws run a wide gamut from enforced attendance to a policy commitment to attendance which is unenforceable. General reform laws dealing with truancy and dropouts have been passed in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. Thirteen additional states (plus Guam) have passed enabling legislation as a precursor to more substantial revisions. Florida, North Carolina and Illinois, like Maine, have established statewide commissions to address the problems of truancy and dropping out and these commissions have continuing input into state-level planning and implementation. States which have made the most comprehensive efforts to address the problems appear to be those in which a specific individual has been assigned primary responsibility to develop and focus their strategy.

Where Are the Frontrunners Going?

States which are actively planning to combat the twin problems of truancy and dropping out have generally recognized the need for a multi-disciplinary approach. They have recognized that the schools cannot resolve problems which are based in many causes outside the school alone. They have enlisted the aid of a variety of agencies, businesses, volunteers and other departments of state and local government. The sheer variety of participants is the distinguishing characteristic of their programs. Moreover, those who have made the greatest progress are those which are focusing the most attention on prevention, although not to the exclusion of remedial programs. For example, they place great reliance in the demonstrated effectiveness of Headstart as a truancy prevention program in early grades (K-3) and as a general academic and social step-stool where schools provide follow-up in later years. They see these and other preschool and early elementary programs as the means to address problems which play themselves out as school failure in junior high and high school.

What Works?

Many states provided impressive catalogs of alternative programs. Standouts included West Virginia, Iowa, Florida, New Jersey and Washington State. Flexibility in curriculum design and requirements were seen as the key to effective alternative programs in California, Iowa and Florida. In addition, Florida and Iowa both stressed that effective programs require low student-teacher ratios and flexible curriculum requirements. In some cases this includes financial incentives to schools which undertake these programs. Iowa allows a weighted per pupil reimbursement of 1.4 for each dropout or potential dropout in an alternative program; Florida allows 1.7.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN MAINE?

Trying to Count Maine's Dropouts

Although complete data are not available, Maine dropout rates appear consistent with national statistics. Among the states, graduation rates range from a low of 56 percent to a high of 95 percent. In June, 1983, the State reported 13,935 students graduating from high school, some 77 percent of the number who entered four years earlier. That puts Maine's graduation rate at just above the national average of 75 percent.

Of those students whom Maine lost in the four years ending in June, 1983, 2,575 are identified as dropouts. The fate of the remainder (1,584) is unknown. Some undoubtedly transferred to schools out of state. A few died. The remainder are simply not accounted for. The absence of reliable information on such a significant number of students impedes an accurate assessment of the scope of the problem. That same lack of data also adds to the difficulty of determining whether or not the trend is improving.

Maine has many bright dropouts and not all of those identified as dropouts have permanently ended their schooling. A number subsequently enter night school and obtain their diplomas, while a still larger number study for and obtain their General Education Development (GED) certificate. (See Figure A). Data suggest that up to 40 percent of those who fail to graduate with their classes complete their studies through one of these alternatives. That means, however, that some 60 percent of those who leave Maine high schools in mid-stream never complete their studies. But, again, the absence of a reliable system for tracking students leaves data open to question.

Trying To Count Maine's Truants

The exact number of truants/dropouts within Maine, on any given year, is at this time difficult to ascertain. The reasons for this appear to be a combination of several factors:

(1) Significant disparity among Maine schools in both the definitions used to apply to and subsequently count truants/dropouts.

(2) A difference in levels of sophistication and subsequent accuracy of each school's student counting mechanisms *1. Some schools have highly computerized, very accurate student registration and tracking systems, while others use the more familiar, but less accurate biannual paper tracking system.

(3) Students in Maine are officially counted twice during the school year; once on October 1 of each school year and again on the following April 1 of the same school year. Indications by some of the school systems contacted suggest that the October 1 count might not be a completely accurate reflection of the number of actual students in the school, as some of the students counted as being present may have, in fact, already dropped out. By the April 1 count, the schools have a much more accurate picture of what students have officially dropped out and/or are truant. Thus, April 1 counts may be considered to be more accurate.

(4) Since the per pupil reimbursement is tied to the October/April counts, a disincentive for schools to vigorously pursue accurate October 1 student counts may inadvertently occur.

Who Drops Out?

Again, Maine's experience echoes themes set out in national surveys. Although there is no single profile of the dropout, there are characteristics which indicate a high risk of dropping out. While they are still in school, future dropouts have lower self-esteem, feel that they have less control over their own lives, have lower test scores and lower grades, do less home work, date more frequently and have parents who are less likely to know what their children are doing than do students who complete school. *2

Although many young people cannot articulate the source of their disenchantment, Committee interviews with former truants, dropouts, teachers and administrators who have enticed them back into the classroom cite a variety of factors. Many students do not feel they can succeed in the school because of academic, social, or economic pressures. Others are users of drugs and/or alcohol. Of the students in the NASSP *3 study who could identify some over-riding factors:

one-third cited poor grades;
another third said they disliked school;
one-fifth reported leaving to accept employment;
nearly one-fifth leave to get married while one-fourth of females who drop out cite pregnancy as the reason; and
one-sixth cited inability to get along with teachers.

When Do We Lose Them?

A more extensive study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics which surveyed 30,000 sophomores and 28,000 seniors in 1980 showed findings (below) similar to those of NASSP:

> For male dropouts, the most frequently cited reason was "I had poor grades; was not doing well in school" (36 percent), which was followed by "school was not for me; I did not like school" (35 percent), and "I was offered a job and I chose to work" (27 percent). "I couldn't get along with teachers" was the reason given by 21 percent of the male dropouts, and "I was expelled or suspended" by 13 percent. About 14 percent indicated that they dropped out because they had to help support their families.
>
> For females, the first four most frequently cited reasons were: "I got married or planned to get married" (31 percent); "school was not for me" (31 percent); "had poor grades" (30 percent)' and "pregnancy" (23 percent). Being "offered a job" was cited by 11 percent of the female dropouts, and "couldn't get along with the teachers" by 10 percent." *4. An unscientific study conducted at the Bangor Adult Education Department confirmed the percentages reflected in the NASSP 1985 presentations.

In Maine, dropping out of school is primarily a phenomenon of the high school years. Historically the greatest number and percentage of dropouts occurs in the tenth and eleventh grades (Sophomore and Junior years). (See Figure B) However, beginning in 1977, both the numbers and percentages (rate) of dropouts in the ninth grades (Freshman years) began a marked increase and after 1979 passed 12th graders in absolute numbers and percentage (rates). (See Figure C) This trend of earlier dropping out bears watching and may emphasize a need for earlier intervention programs.

A second trend exhibited by the available Maine data relates to when students may be dropping out. Students in Maine normally enroll in September and first get counted as enrolled on October 1. April 1, and end of year (June) counts consistently decline exhibiting a predictable out migration during the school year of students at all secondary grade levels. (See Figure D) However, subsequent school year enrollments as exhibited by October counts are always higher than previous school year counts on April and June, but lower than the October counts.

What do these data suggest? Do students who dropped out during one school year return in the Fall of the next school year and if so do they dropout again? The answer is "yes", since the other possible causes in the June to October enrollment gains are not supported by immigration of students to Maine, nor general school population gains. The fact that more students show up at Maine school doors in September than went out the doors in the previous June supports the idea that preventive/intervention programs must be established earlier in the school year when "at risk" students are still in school if they are to be effective. Further investigation efforts in this area should prove useful.

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*1 Interviews with several Maine school principals during Winter/Spring 1986.

*2 NASSP, 1985 study - noted in the Bulletin - Education - November

*3 Ibid

*4 National Center for Education Statistics, "Bulletin", November, 1983.

MAINE LAW

Who Must Attend School?

Maine law requires youngsters age seven to seventeen to attend a public day school or certain alternatives. Exceptions can be made for those age fifteen or who have completed the ninth grade with the concurrence of both parents and the school. Another exception permits children to obtain an education in other settings if these offer "equivalent instruction". The law also provides for "alternate programs" which are defined as "suitable programs of work, work-study or training for which students may be excused from attendance in regular school programs." Students, fourteen and older, may participate in such programs with permission of their parents and the school principal.

What Is An Habitual Truant?

The statutes currently define habitual truants as students who are absent without excuse for "the equivalent of ten full days, or for at least one-half day on seven consecutive school days, within any six-month period."

What Are The Schools Required To Do About Truancy?

The laws require schools to convene a school board hearing whenever they document habitual truancy. If the board finds the student is an habitual truant, it can either instruct the student to attend school and inform the parents of their responsibility under the law to compel their child's attendance or it may waive the requirement to attend if the student is at least fourteen. If waiver is denied, appeal is to the Commissioner of Education. In addition, local superintendents must report, on an annual basis, the number of habitual truants and describe efforts to promote attendance. The reports must include any court actions brought by the school to compel attendance and provide any other information requested by the Commissioner.

What Are Schools Required To Do About Dropouts?

The 1975 amendments to the school attendance laws called for each superintendent who is responsible for one or more high school grades (nine to twelve) to establish a Positive Action Committee (PAC). These Committees are comprised of teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, students, dropouts and local residents who are charged to develop plans for dealing with dropouts. Following submission to the school board, these plans are filed with the State.

Some PACs have fulfilled both the spirit and letter of the law and have developed creative options to keep their students in school. Other Committees do little more than prepare the required report.

What Happens If Johnny Still Won't Go To School?

The District Courts have jurisdiction over violations of the attendance statutes which constitute civil offenses. Offenses include "being primarily responsible" for the truancy of an habitual truant, inducing a student to be absent and harboring an absent student. Fines of up to $500 are permitted. In addition to fixing fines, courts are empowered to order professional counseling for offenders. Such actions are rarely prosecuted and convictions are more infrequent still.

However, those schools which report students' initial and continued absences are penalized. They receive no state reimbursement for dropouts and, for those who return to classes and are enrolled in a program for dropouts and truants, they are reimbursed at one-tenth the rate for a regular student, unless the returning student takes a full five course load throughout the school year.

ALTERNATIVES IN EDUCATION

Are Maine Schools Doing Enough To Encourage Attendance?

Educators have long recognized that not all students can be taught in the standard school setting. Regardless of a school's efforts to provide special attention, it has been demonstrated that a variety of alternative instructional models are required if we seriously intend to educate all students, students who have a wide variety of abilities and needs. The Subcommittee on Alternative Programs surveyed all public secondary schools to ascertain their commitment to provide alternative programs.

Although the 1975 amendments to the education laws were intended to encourage School Administrative Units (SAUs) to develop alternative education programs or to share programs offered by others to meet the needs of students, the Subcommittee found relatively few SAUs do so. A 1981 Maine survey found such programs in only 34 schools. By November 1984 that number had decreased to 31, while seven months later the number had dwindled to 25. In addition, these programs were very short lived. Many of those operating in one year were not the next. A January, 1986 check of programs reported as operating in June, 1985, found that many had been terminated. Those still functioning ran the gamut from separate programs operated in a discrete alternative facility to those which offered only tutoring within the regular school program. Nonetheless, 12 of 75 districts surveyed in 1986, (16 percent) reported they provide alternative programs and three more said they were considering doing so in the immediate future.

Are We Doing Anything Right?

There are several excellent alternative programs in Maine. Some are provided within the public school system, others are managed by private agencies which accept public school students on a tuition basis. All share several of the elements cited as common to similar programs which succeed elsewhere in the nation.

PREVENTION

Can We Prevent Truancy and Dropping Out?

The Subcommittee on prevention examined a wide body of research which documents that truancy, dropping out and other harmful behaviors can be prevented and that certain prevention strategies promise a high probability of success. These are efforts which are directed at the major influences or institutions in the lives of young people: the family, the school, the community, the workplace, and the peer group. Strategies which focus on these influences or institutions, rather than on the individual, and which offer diverse opportunities for participation by all who are affected are more likely to succeed than those which attempt to change individual behavior. Those ends are achieved by promoting opportunities for youth to establish a stake in conventional behavior, to form attachments with conventional persons, and to acquire a belief in the moral validity of the present arrangements in society. Conversely, research also indicates that arrangements in those institutions can generate distinctive behavior. When young people perceive that they cannot attain legitimate goals by legitimate means and assume that they are powerless to improve their situations, conventional behavior on their part appears futile and deviance attractive. In order to prevent undesirable behavior, the arrangements and process which have a negative effect on youth must be identified and altered, while those which have a positive effect on youth must be encouraged and strengthened. By reducing the negative effects of institutions on youth and by encouraging positive effects, youth are more likely to develop a sense of commitment to society and to obtaining an education and to socially-acceptable behavior. Succinctly, incorporation in the traditional school system, at the earliest and all levels, of those components previously cited as common characteristics of successful alternative programs constitutes generic prevention.

The Prevention Subcommittee was troubled neither by the theory of prevention nor a lack of appropriate models (there are catalogues for both) but, rather, by the historic reluctance of formal systems to pay other than lip-service to prevention. The Committee is not blind to the need for remedial services, but it is convinced that remediation alone cannot address the long-term problems associated with failing to complete school and other self-destructive behavior. Although children who are currently truant or who have dropped out of school merit immediate, appropriate intervention, long-range planning and a systematic commitment are necessary if the number of children who experience these problems is to be substantially reduced. The Committee fully realizes that prevention programs may be perceived as difficult to measure and prevention efforts can be more distant in achievement than attempts at remediation. It is, nonetheless, convinced that a commitment to prevention is the only way to provide an opportunity for all Maine's children to become productive citizens. Although the preventive approach lacks the immediate attractiveness of a quick remedy, it holds greater promise for long-term effectiveness. Moreover, in a time of limited resources, a commitment to prevention especially recommends itself, because prevention is susceptible to planned, directed, incremental improvements which can be undertaken without an immense financial outlay initially and is, ultimately, less costly and more effective than remediation.

What Is The State's Role in Prevention?

The State and each Maine community have distinct but compatible roles to play in fostering the development of each Maine child into a productive, law-abiding citizen. The role of the State is to provide leadership, information, and incentives which will assist communities to carry out their mission - to educate their children. The State must coordinate its own resources for all services to children. It goes without saying that hungry children, abused children and chemically dependent children cannot participate fully in school. Because it is in a position to ascertain the conditions affecting these services on a statewide basis, it should also assist communities to coordinate their own resources and those that lend themselves to sharing among communities.

The State can fulfill these responsibilities through a variety of models, but it is essential that it first make a strong, highly-visible policy commitment to prevent truancy and dropping out as well as other symptoms of social dysfunction. Second, it must commit its own resources to implementing that policy, so that the policy is neither perceived as, nor becomes, a lip-service effort. Third, it must ensure that its fiscal policies encourage rather than inhibit local efforts to prevent and address disaffection with school. Fourth, although the primary responsibility for overseeing implementation of school-based prevention programs must lie with the Department of Educational and Cultural Services, the State must enlist the commitment and resources of the other youth-serving departments in this effort and ensure that each allocates its prevention resources to avoid duplication and to ensure access to services, regardless of the child's status. Fifth, it must set about implementation in a well reasoned, planned campaign which will permit incremental progress and give the best prospects for ensuring ultimate success.

What Is the Role of Schools and Communities in Prevention?

The community, in its broadest sense (families, schools, service and religious groups, businesses, and local government), is responsible for nurturing children so they may become productive citizens. It goes without saying that providing children an education is a major part of their maturation, a key component of their potential productivity and that all components of the community have some responsibility in this process. The Prevention Subcommittee is convinced that, the greater and more comprehensive such participation can become, the greater is the potential for success in all processes which contribute to the development of children.

A community is best equipped to assess its own problems and to develop plans and programs which are responsive not only to the problem but also to a community's resources - cultural, demographic, and financial. Each community is already, in some sense, committed to identifying problems and planning strategies to address many of the needs of its young people. With leadership from the state, those efforts can be directed more effectively, in many cases, than they are at present.

Why Haven't We Done Better?

Many of the answers are expressed or implied in the preceding summaries of the deliberations of the Subcommittees. The Subcommittee on Statistics would reply that it is extremely difficult to hit a target when you have little reliable information on its size or location. The Subcommittee on Maine Law would rejoin that education statutes which are unenforceable and frequently inconsistent handicap school efforts to respond. The Subcommittee on Alternative Programs would be quick to say that alternatives cannot be promoted when fiscal policies encourage schools to minimize problems, while reimbursement rates are reduced for those who entice students back to the classroom. And, the Subcommittee on Prevention would note in conclusion that, unless prevention programs enjoy a serious commitment, next year's crop of truants and dropouts is as certain as snow in winter.

Nonetheless, these same reports cite laudable efforts by some schools to address the problems of truancy and dropping out. Moreover, the previous Legislature has provided for staff resources in the Department of Educational and Cultural Services to develop a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to reduce truancy and dropping out and to coordinate efforts to provide alternative education in the various SAUs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

	TYPE		STATUS			
	Admin.	Legis.	In Process	Partially Achieved	Achieved	Pending
1. The education statutes should be recodified and amended to promote clarity and consistency, to include a clear statement of the premises and goals for public education in Maine, and to make it explicit that:		X				X
a) School attendance is compulsory;	X					X
b) Attendance will be enforced;		X				X
c) Educational options must be available to all students. (These options should assist students to achieve their educational potential, regardless of their mental, emotional, physical or social limitations.);		X				X
d) The School Improvement Plan for each School Administrative Unit must include information on the extent of truancy and dropping out and on the steps being taken to address these problems, including descriptions of alternative education programs.		X			X	
2. The Positive Action Committees (PACs) should have authority and responsibility for assessing truancy and dropping out and for proposing and monitoring alternative and prevention programs for all grades (K through 12).		X				X
3. The report of the PAC shall be a component of the annual School Improvement Plan.		X		X		
4. Documentation of an effective PAC should be a prerequisite for school districts seeking State funds in association with truancy and dropping out.	X					X

	TYPE		STATUS			
	Admin.	Legis.	In Process	Partially Achieved	Achieved	Pending
5. The Department of Educational and Cultural Services should establish an office, to be staffed by at least one full-time consultant, to provide technical assistance to the schools in dealing with prevention and remediation of truancy and dropping out. The office should be responsible for alternative education and prevention programs. The assistance provided by the office should include, but not be limited to:		X			X	
a) Establishing definitions for truants and dropouts and collecting and disseminating timely, accurate and consistent information on these problems. This information will include, at minimum, the incidence of truancy and dropping out, the demographics of these incidents and the characteristics of truants and dropouts. (Procedures for collecting data shall be developed in consultation with reporting schools.);		X			X	
b) Assisting schools and their communities in the planning for, developing, coordinating and operating alternative education programs;		X			X	
c) Making an annual, statewide assessment of the problems associated with truancy and dropping out and developing long-range and short-range plans to address these problems. The plans will provide for the evaluation of programs dealing with truancy and dropping out;					X	
d) Promoting the coordination of resources among State agencies to address the problems;					X	
e) Coordinating alternative education programs with the Department of Education; and					X	
f) Serving as a clearinghouse on a wide range of alternative programs and activities.					X	
6. The Commissioner should include the plan for dealing with truancy and dropping out in his annual report to the Governor and Legislature on the status of public education.	X	X				X

	TYPE		STATUS			
	Admin.	Legis.	In Process	Partially Achieved	Achieved	Pending
7. The Commissioner should appoint a multi-disciplinary and regionally representative committee to advise him and the Legislature on alternative education programs and other programs to prevent and remediate truancy and dropping out. The Committee should include representation from minority groups. Members of the Advisory Committee on Truants, Dropouts and Alternative Programs should be considered for membership. The Committee should participate, as appropriate, in developing and implementing the plans previously referenced. Such participation may include, but need not be limited to, reviewing and commenting on the plans.	X			X		
8. The Interdepartmental Coordinating Committee (IDC) should establish a standing subcommittee which is responsible for developing, updating annually, implementing and monitoring a State Prevention Plan. The primary objective of the subcommittee shall be to coordinate planning for and the implementation of the prevention programs of the four major youth-serving departments. The Plan shall focus on prevention of the problems of youth including truancy, dropping out of school, chemical dependency, deliquency and neglect.	X OR	X				
9. Information from the truancy and dropout prevention components of School Improvement Plans and other community prevention plans should be incorporated in the State Prevention Plan. To accomplish this:	X OR	X				
a) The subcommittee should include representation from community agencies involved in prevention;						
b) Representatives of these community agencies should also be included among the membership of any committee or subcommittee of the IDC established to review and act on grants or contracts of State funds for prevention programs.						
10. Development of alternative education programs should be encouraged by setting a school reimbursement rate for a student enrolled in an alternative education program which is not less than the rate for a student in a regular public day school.		X				

	TYPE		STATUS			
	Admin.	Legis.	In Process	Partially Achieved	Achieved	Pending
11. Funds should be allocated to permit the five School Administrative Units which have the highest reported incidence of truancy and dropping out to develop model programs for early intervention which, if successful, could be used throughout the State.	X OR	X				
12. The State should encourage the development and implementation of pre-school education programs which are accessible to all Maine children.	X OR	X				

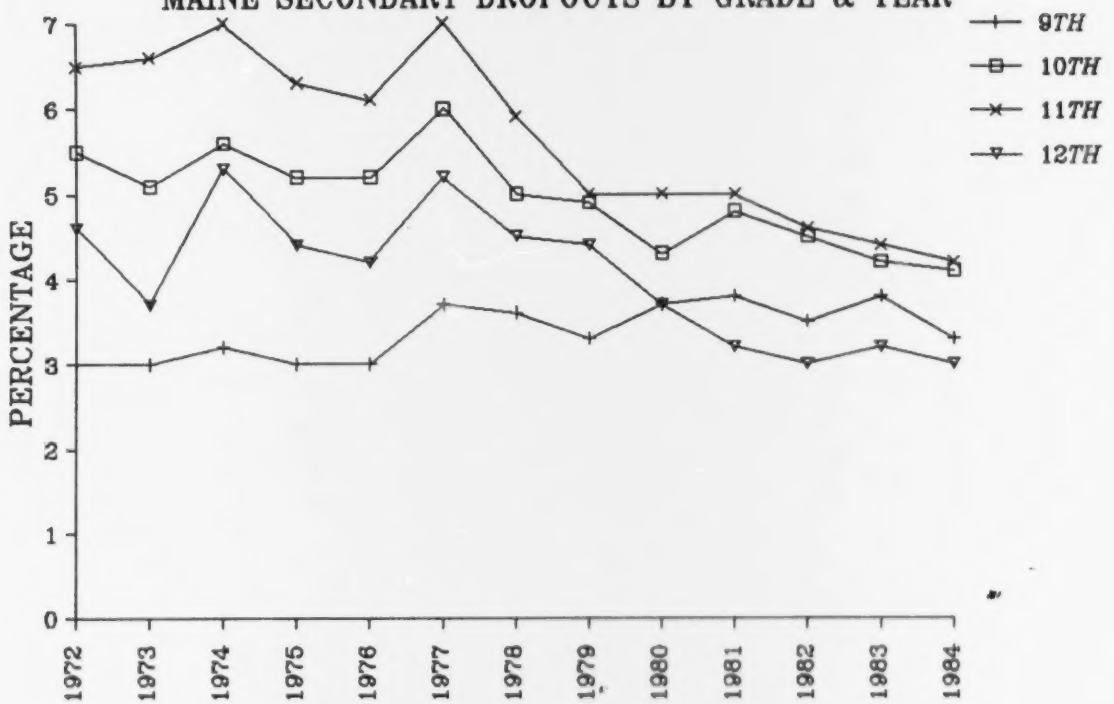
APPENDIX

FIGURE A
ADULT HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION
STATE TOTALS

YEAR	HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA	G.E.D.	TOTAL
77-78	1,434	2,177	3,617
78-79	1,324	2,312	3,636
79-80	1,299	2,738	4,037
80-81	1,139	2,781	3,920
81-82	1,037	2,731	3,768
82-83	1,153	2,674	3,827
83-84	973	2,611	3,584
84-85	905	3,080	3,985

FIGURE B

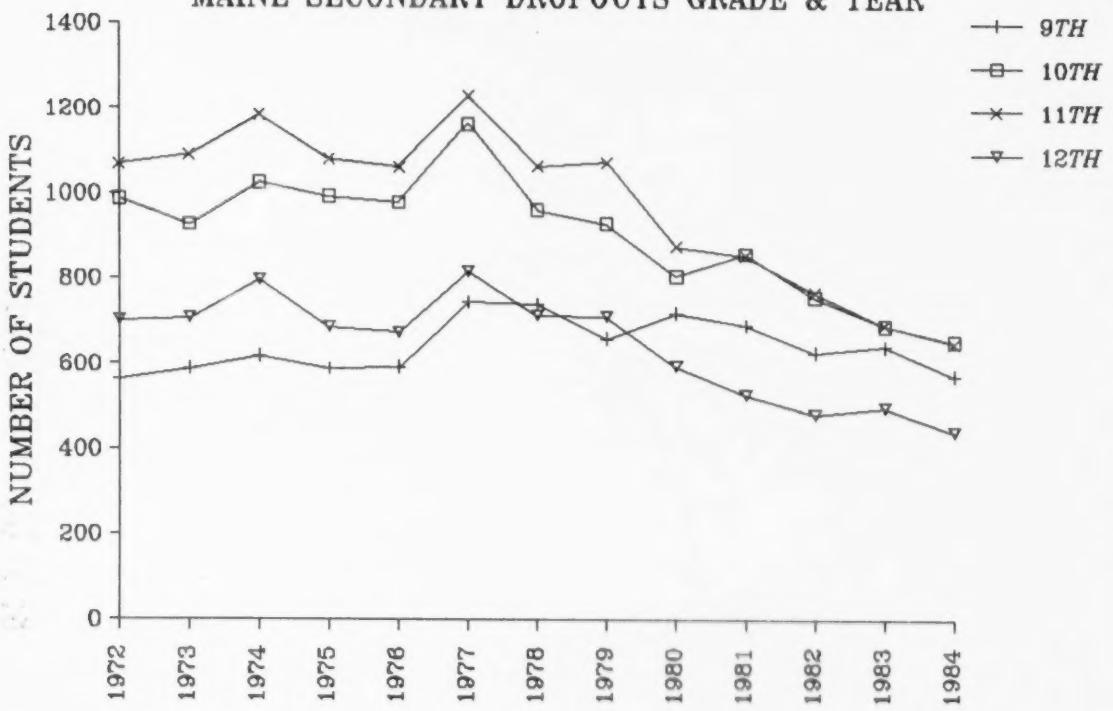
MAINE SECONDARY DROPOUTS BY GRADE & YEAR



GRADE	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
9TH	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.0	3.0	3.7	3.6	3.3	3.7	3.8	3.5	3.8	3.3
10TH	5.5	5.1	5.6	5.2	5.2	6.0	5.0	4.9	4.3	4.8	4.5	4.2	4.1
11TH	6.5	6.6	7.0	6.3	6.1	7.0	5.9	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.6	4.4	4.2
12TH	4.6	3.7	5.3	4.4	4.2	5.2	4.5	4.4	3.7	3.2	3.0	3.2	3.0

FIGURE C

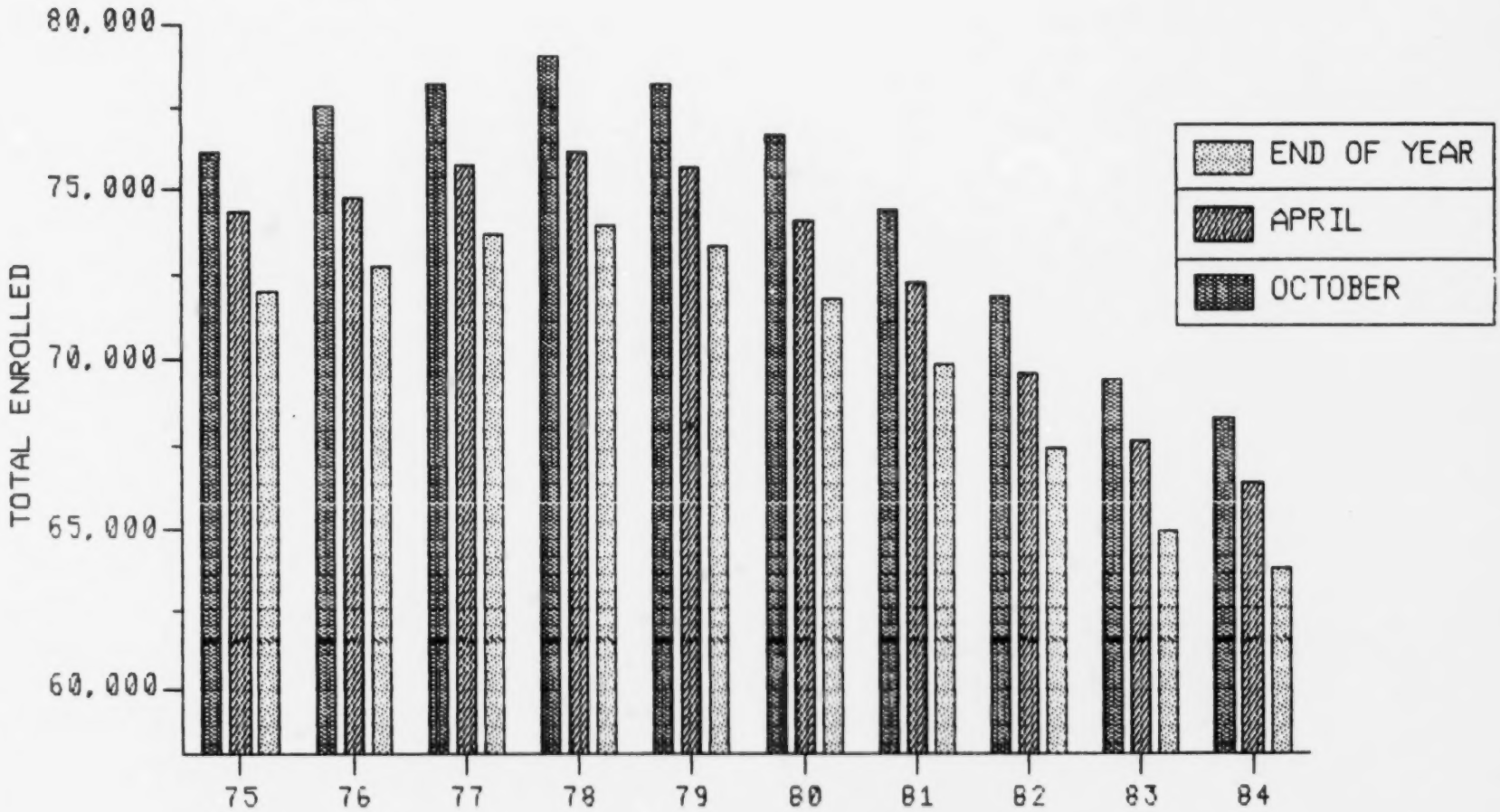
MAINE SECONDARY DROPOUTS GRADE & YEAR



GRADE	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
9TH	563	588	618	587	591	743	738	658	717	690	626	640	572
10TH	987	926	1025	992	978	1162	960	927	804	856	755	689	653
11TH	1068	1090	1184	1079	1060	1229	1062	1071	873	852	766	690	649
12TH	701	707	797	685	673	815	712	709	594	526	480	497	440
TOTAL	3319	3311	3624	3343	3302	3949	3472	3365	2988	2924	2627	2516	2314

FIGURE D

TOTAL SECONDARY ENROLLMENT IN MAINE
OCT., APRIL, & END-OF-YEAR



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